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## Senate OKs flexible leave for caregivers

By [Rick Maze](#)

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Federal employees who are taking care of the children of deployed service members would have more flexible leave under a Senate-approved plan.

Called the Military Family Support Act, the plan attached by voice vote as an amendment to the 2007 defense authorization bill allows federal workers designated as the primary caregiver for a military member who is deployed overseas to use leave donated by co-workers ahead of their own earned leave when they need time off to take care of children.

The defense bill is S 2766.

The legislation would require the Office of Personnel Management to amend leave policy. The change would be temporary, part of a two-year test that could lead to permanent changes

Binding language applies only to federal workers, but the plan also encourages — while not requiring — the Labor Department to work with private companies so they also could provide extra time off, if needed, for people designated as military caregivers.

Designated caregivers are used by single parents and by dual-service couples when both are deployed overseas. Usually, but not always, the designated caregiver is a relative.

The federal leave-sharing program would be available to federal workers age 21 and older, but the age cap would not apply if the employee were a service member's spouse.

Sen. James M. Jeffords, I-Vt, one of the chief sponsors, said relaxed rules are “important step forward in providing military families with some well-deserved support during the extended absence of a mother, father, husband or wife.”

“Military families make tremendous sacrifices as their loved ones risk their lives overseas, and the federal government must do its part in helping them adjust to day-to-day life without a member of their household,” he said.

Sen. Russ Feingold, D-Wis., another primary sponsor, said the bill would provide “some relief during the difficult times when loved ones are bravely serving abroad.”

“Families with loved ones serving abroad face unique challenges and we should help reduce the burdens they face,” Feingold said.

No similar provision in the House version of the defense bill exists, so the fate of the provision will rest with House and Senate negotiators who work out differences. Similar proposals in the past have faced opposition from the Bush administration and from private businesses because they would have required changes in the Family and Medical Leave Act, affecting all private-sector businesses.

The federal government also has not been pleased with the idea of providing extra leave to some workers, those taking care of service members' families, while not providing similar policies to other federal

workers who may be in similar circumstances that do not involve military children. Because the federal government allows leave to be donated for a variety of causes, sponsors hope they can overcome past opposition.